

THE MUSIC OF

FRÉDÉRIC  
CHOPIN

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# Solo Piano Works

## An Introduction

Frédéric Chopin's career is intricately intertwined with the piano. Although he made forays into orchestral work and chamber work, Chopin did not write any major work that did not include the piano. Certainly, his education would have given him the opportunity to write for other instruments, but his natural inclination led him to focus on piano, and he excelled at composing for the instrument. We can separate most of Chopin's solo piano works into genre categories based on either their function or aspects of their style. The most prominent of these categories—what we would call, “character pieces”—include *étude*, *nocturne*, *prelude*, *mazurka*, *polonaise*, *waltz*, *impromptu* and *ballade*. Chopin composed some of these character pieces throughout his career, while others came from specific times or circumstances. There are a couple of things we can say about most of the solo piano pieces Chopin wrote, regardless of the genre: his harmonies were often surprising, his rhythms were often flexible (and many times were drawn from dance), and despite a definite feeling of dramatic character in so many of his works, Chopin preferred not to give descriptive or suggestive titles to his pieces.

## Études

Early in his career, Chopin decided that public performance would not be a large part of his life. His health was fragile, and the pressure of public performance was detrimental. (He gave about thirty public performances in the course of his career.) Instead, Chopin dedicated himself to composing and teaching, sometimes combining the two. Chopin wrote his *Études* for his students, and they can therefore be categorized by their primary function: pedagogical. (“*Étude*” literally means “study” in French.) But they are more than just that. They comprise a technical system of learning that is not only utilitarian, but also artful. In addition to becoming a standard of piano pedagogy, the *Études* became concert pieces. The piano as an instrument had changed quite a bit over Chopin's life, and these works not only represent a new style of playing that reflects the new aspects of the instrument, but they also provide an encapsulation of Chopin's unique style.

Chopin composed three sets, two of twelve (Opp. 10 and 25) and one set of three, twenty-seven in total. A few of the popular *Études* have acquired titles, although none of the titles were Chopin's invention. The first set of twelve was composed between 1829 and 1832, and published—revised and reordered—the following year. Chopin dedicated the set to his friend Franz Liszt. The next set was composed between 1832 and 1836. This set was dedicated to Liszt's mistress, Marie d'Agoult, although no one is exactly certain why. The final three were written in 1839, and they were meant to be part of a piano pedagogy book by Ignaz Moscheles and François-Joseph Fétis.

Piano students all over the world are still assigned Chopin Études, not only because of they are carefully constructed pedagogical pieces, but because, despite their technical aim, they are also beautiful. The Études weren't the only pieces Chopin wrote for his students. Many of the pieces discussed below were conceived for student performance, although some are clearly too technically complex for all but the most talented pianist.

## Nocturnes

Irish composer John Field (1782-1837) composed eighteen single-movement pieces for piano he called Nocturnes, and they were influential for being evocative without being specifically programmatic, and for not following a set form or structure. Field's Nocturnes featured a flowing melody over chordal accompaniment, which was likely meant to sound like strumming. Chopin, who admired Field and his work, composed all of his twenty-one Nocturnes between 1827 and 1846. Most of them were published when Chopin was alive, two were published posthumously, one was an early piece that Chopin didn't specifically call a Nocturne, but which fits into the general style of the others. The numbering of the Nocturnes is therefore not strictly chronological.

In his early years, Chopin was often compared to Field, although Field wasn't overly fond of Chopin's work. Like Field's Nocturnes, Chopin's Nocturnes maintain the primary melody in the right hand and the accompanying chords in the left hand, but he also uses rubato rhythm and more pedal to add dramatic weight. Chopin also seemed to draw inspiration from vocal pieces like arias. Friend and fellow composer Franz Liszt made the comparison between Chopin's Nocturnes and the "bel canto" arias of Italian composers like Bellini.

Although each of Chopin's Nocturnes is unique, structurally, he tended to use an ABA form in which the repetition of the "A" was highly embellished and the "B" section outlined a contrasting mood. There are exceptions, of course. Two of the Nocturnes don't have a B section at all (Op. 9, No. 2 and Op. 55, No. 2), and one of the Nocturnes repeats the A and B section an additional time (Op. 37, No. 2). The moods of the Nocturnes may be characterized by melancholy or pensiveness, and Chopin chose the tempos of *Larghetto*, *Lento*, and *Andante* (one of them is marked *Allegretto*). He published some of them in pairs.

## Preludes

The term "Prelude" suggests an opening piece that introduces perhaps a larger work that follows. In the realm of Romantic character pieces, the Prelude was a stand-alone, one-movement work that could display a variety of moods. Chopin's preludes were short, none of them more than ninety measures long. The shortest of the collection was just twelve bars, leading some critics—including contemporary Robert Schumann—to view them as somehow incomplete, or mere sketches. Liszt, however, viewed them as innovative and poetic.



Chopin composed twenty-four Preludes between 1835 and 1839 and collected them into one opus number (28), publishing them in 1839. In the French edition, Chopin dedicated the collection to Camille Pleyel, a piano-maker, and the man who commissioned the work. For the German publication, Chopin chose a different dedicatee, composer Joseph Christoph Kessler. Kessler and Chopin knew each other from Kessler's visit to Warsaw in 1829, and it was in that year that Kessler had dedicated a set of twenty-four preludes to Chopin.

Although each work can stand alone, some scholars have suggested that the collection is one large work with twenty-four pieces, citing motivic connections among the preludes, and even musical connections from the ends of some preludes to the beginnings of others. Chopin never played all twenty-four in a row in a public performance. In fact, he never played more than four in concert. The twenty-four Preludes vary in character, tempo, and key, and in the set they seem, for the most part, to alternate slow and fast. The keys follow the pattern of the circle of fifths, with each major key preceding its relative minor. This pattern of circle of fifths had been used by Joseph Christoph Kessler in his set of twenty-four etudes.

Although the music suggests non-musical ideas, or emotions, Chopin didn't give them evocative names, like Schumann and Liszt did for some of their pieces that were of a similar character. Hans von Bülow suggested some names for the preludes like "Reunion," "Tolling Bells," "The Polish Dancer," and "Raindrop." Of these names, only "Raindrop" seems to be widely used. The twentieth prelude in the set became the basis for variations by Rachmaninoff and twentieth century Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni.

Chopin wrote three other Preludes, not in this set. No. 25 (also catalogued as Op. 45) was composed in 1841 and dedicated to Princess E. Czernicheff. No. 26 had actually been composed in the 1830s and bears the tempo marking *Presto con leggerezza*. It was a gift for Liszt's student and pianist Pierre Wolff. The twenty-seventh prelude—which was left incomplete—has been called the "Devil's Trill" by musicologist Jeffrey Kallberg. Giuseppe Tartini, a composer whose music Chopin might have heard, composed a violin sonata called "The Devil's Trill." Kallberg "realized" the prelude from Chopin's incomplete sketches. The piece was played in public for the first time in 2002. Despite the excitement of having a "new" piece by Chopin, any reconstruction or realization of incomplete sketches—by any composer—will bring up questions of the composer's true intentions. This prelude is no exception.

## Mazurkas

Chopin composed a number of solo piano pieces that are similar in character to a Polish folk dance called the Mazurka. The traditional dance is quick and in a triple meter. It derives from other Polish forms, the kujawiak and oberek. The mazurka traveled to other parts of Europe, and Chopin helped popularize the dance with the nearly seventy mazurkas he wrote for the piano, although Chopin's mazurkas were not necessarily meant to accompany actual dancing.

Of the nearly seventy mazurkas that exist, fifty-eight have been published (forty-five before his death and thirteen posthumously). Others that we believe are extant are likely in private collections.

Chopin attempted mazurkas beginning in the 1820s, but his use of the form became more focused after political events in Poland in 1830 inspired him to honor the culture of his native land. Nationalism like this gained momentum in the nineteenth century, and Chopin's mazurkas and polonaises were no doubt influential to other composers of the time. There have been debates about how Chopin experienced the folk music of Poland, whether it was directly or indirectly, but no matter what, Chopin made an effort to honor the tradition. He incorporated some of the elements of the dance—distinctive rhythms, repetitive sections—with musical elements we associate with Chopin, like unique and interesting harmonies and contrapuntal textures.

## Polonaises

In addition to Mazurkas, Chopin also wrote Polonaises, which were solo piano pieces inspired by a Polish dance in triple time. The dance was normally performed at carnival parties and at student dances. Chopin was not the only composer who used this designation. Other works with the *alla polacca* notation include pieces by J.S. Bach, C.P.E. Bach, Mozart, and Schubert.

Chopin composed his first Polonaise when he was just a child, and his last dates from just a few years before his death in 1849. Of the twenty-three polonaises we believe Chopin wrote in his lifetime, there are a few thought lost. Seven were published when Chopin was alive, and nine were published posthumously. Some of the polonaises have nicknames, like, the "Military" or the "Heroic." Chopin did not, as a rule, give these kinds of names to his pieces, but as we have seen in some of the preludes and other pieces, these nicknames just become part of the story. The "Heroic" name for the Polonaise in A-flat major, Op. 53, seems to have originated with Chopin's companion, George Sand, who suggested that the piece be a symbol of the 1848 Revolution because of its heroic character. One of the most famous polonaises is the Polonaise-Fantasie of 1846. It is a complex work of virtuosity that Chopin conceived as a Fantasy first. The aspects that suggested Polonaise must have emerged as Chopin was composing.

## Waltzes

Like the mazurkas, Chopin's Waltzes were not meant to accompany dancers. He began writing waltzes in 1824, when he was a teenager in Poland, but at first he didn't consider the waltz a serious art form. Indeed, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was some controversy about the waltz causing dizziness and shortness of breath among dancers, and some scandal that the waltz allowed men and women to share an intimate embrace in public. Chopin's Waltzes, which were meant more for seated audiences than dancers, achieved an

artfulness that elevated the art form. In addition to the waltzes he must have heard while living in Vienna, Chopin may have also been influenced by German composer Carl Maria von Weber, who wrote a concert work based on the waltz called *Invitation to the Dance*.

Chopin published just eight Waltzes when he was alive, but wrote many more. Five more were published in 1855, and one more came to light in 1868. There were more that were catalogued, but many of those have been lost, including half a dozen that Chopin's sister had in her house when it burned down. All convey the 3/4 time associated with the waltz, but some have quick tempos and dance-like moods, while some display a melancholy and pensive character. Like many dance forms, the Waltzes often consisted of distinctive sixteen-bar melodies that were repeated. Chopin sometimes embellished this form, and sometimes kept it simple. The dramatic shifts within one Waltz could be quite affecting.

## Impromptus

Chopin composed four Impromptus, which are one-movement, multi-sectional pieces that suggest the character of improvised music. The first, Op. 29, was composed in 1837. It has three sections with the two outer parts in A-flat major and a contrasting section in the middle of F minor. Its quick tempo and continuous figuration in the hands makes it quite a challenge. Impromptu No. 2, Op. 36 was composed two years later. Chopin chose the key of F-sharp major, and again, Chopin constructed a complex work. His gift for melody shines in this particular piece. The third impromptu, Op. 51, was composed in 1843, which was actually his last composed, but not the last one published. He dedicated this piece to one of his pupils, and it was clearly one of his favorite pieces to play because he programmed it on more than one of his rare public performances. In the contrasting middle section, Chopin achieves a great effect by switching the melody to the left hand while the right plays the accompaniment.

The most famous of the four Impromptus is the *Fantaisie-Impromptu* from 1834. The dedicatee was Julian Fontana, a fellow Polish composer and pianist. Fontana, who was Chopin's musical executor, published the work after Chopin's death (without Chopin's blessing). This is actually a work that was written from Chopin's first years in Paris. It is impetuous and striking, and the opening section and the closing are quite quick. The middle section provides a respite with a lovely *Largo* melody. It is this tune that briefly appears at the end, almost like a memory of the melody's ephemeral beauty.

# Ballades

Chopin composed four Ballades for solo piano. Composed between 1835 and 1842, they have a high level of difficulty for players. The name ballade has many old associations, including the Italian Renaissance ballate or the eponymous old French poetic form. Chopin's Ballades may have been inspired by specific poetry by Adam Mickiewicz, who is considered Poland's greatest national poet.

Structurally, the Ballades follow a form that is similar to sonata form, but with some variations. Sonata form presents two themes—usually in differing keys—at the beginning. After a developmental middle section, the two themes return, this time in the same key. In Chopin's Ballades, the themes return, although in his recapitulations, the position of the themes is opposite from the way we would expect to hear them in traditional Sonata form. Chopin's Ballades have inspired other composers, like Chopin's friend and contemporary, Franz Liszt, and Johannes Brahms.

Chopin composed the first ballade in 1835-6, but didn't complete it and is listed as Op. 23. He dedicated the work to Baron Nathaniel von Stockhausen, ambassador to France. There is an introduction, two themes that Chopin explores, and an energetic coda. There are switches of time signature, which is a variation that the subsequent ballades do not feature. The second ballade, Op. 38, was composed over three years, from 1836 to 1839. Robert Schumann had dedicated a piece to Chopin, and Chopin returned the favor with Ballade No. 2. Some felt—Schumann included—that the second Ballade wasn't quite as charming as the first. It may have been inspired by a poem by Mickiewicz, but no one is sure. This ballade begins very quietly, but the middle section is quick and fiery. The ballade eventually returns to the quiet mood of the beginning, but Chopin provided further elaborations.

Ballade No. 3 was composed in 1841 and was dedicated to Pauline de Noailles. Many suspect that the ballade was inspired by Mickiewicz's poem *Undine* or *Switezianka*. There is further speculation that the ballade was inspired by an unsuccessful trip Chopin took to Majorca with George Sand. In addition to similarities to sonata form, Chopin composed variations on segments of the three themes in this ballade. There is a hopeful mood to this ballade, and the major key underlines this. The final ballade was composed in 1842, and was dedicated to Baroness Rothschild, a woman who introduced Chopin to important members of the Parisian aristocracy. It may have been inspired by a Mickiewicz poem about three Polish brothers who find brides. In terms of level of difficulty, this ballade seems to be the most challenging to play. It displays thematic transformation and variations, and ends with an intricately complex coda that shows off Chopin's innovation. This ballade also features counterpoint, and shows a melancholy character. This work is highly dramatic, full of passion, and could be considered the apex of the composer's unique and singular style.

# Cello Sonata

## Cello Sonata

Chopin composed the Sonata in G minor for Piano and Cello in the years 1845 to 1846. According to his letters, Chopin struggled to compose for an instrument other than the piano, but the resulting work shows none of the strain. The Cello Sonata was written for and dedicated to Auguste Franchomme, a French cellist and composer. It was the last work of Chopin's that was published when he was alive, and the composer and Franchomme premiered the work in early 1848, at Chopin's last public concert in Paris.

The sonata is constructed in four movements, with an opening *Allegro moderato*. The opening phrase played by the cello influences so much of the rest of the piece, in all of its movements. This music is very dramatic, with sudden shifts of mood. Although adhering to the basic shape of sonata form, Chopin takes some liberties, and the result is an emotional presentation. A quick *Scherzo* follows, and the rapid motion of the themes allows for a talented display by both players. The trio section provides contrast, offering a lyrical passage. The subsequent *Largo* movement isn't even thirty measures long, but what it lacks in length it makes up for with deeply felt emotion. It is by turns both yearning and hopeful. The lively finale demonstrates Chopin's refined sense of rhythm. The piano and cello seem to spur each other on, and this skillful interplay between the instruments makes one wonder what might have been if Chopin had continued to compose for another ten or twenty years.

# Solo Piano Variations

## Solo Piano Variations

In addition to writing original solo piano works, Chopin also composed a few solo piano pieces based on pre-existent melodies. The advantage of the variation form is that it allows the composer—and the performer as well—to show off innovation and invention in each successive variation. If ever there was a composer who showed virtuosity as both a crafter of musical lines and a skilled performer, it was Chopin.

### *Introduction and Variations on a German Air ("Der Schweitzerbub")*

Chopin set the melody for the German song, "Der Schweitzerbub" in 1826, although it was not published until after his death. The story goes that Katarzyna Sowinska, the wife of a Polish general, heard this song at a concert in Warsaw and asked Chopin for variations. She is the dedicatee of the work. After a brief introduction, Chopin presents the theme very simply. Each subsequent variation is full of surprises and delights. Although there is not much to the tune, Chopin's variations are very entertaining, and he includes all of the expected idiosyncrasies of the form, including a minor-key variation. The final variation that follows the minore section is incredibly graceful and charms right through to the close.

### *Variations ("Souvenir de Paganini")*

Chopin ostensibly composed this when he lived in Warsaw, and we might imagine that he wrote it more as a personal exercise than a piece intended for public consumption. The basis of the Variations is "Carnival of Venice," an Italian tune that Paganini famously played in ever-more-difficult variations. Paganini's concert in Warsaw in 1829 was likely where Chopin heard this piece. Chopin begins with a simple version of the tune and follows with ten variations. Interestingly, Chopin chose to keep the left hand accompaniment the same throughout while varying only the right hand. It's an interesting choice. Perhaps Chopin was using the left hand to represent the orchestral accompaniment, while the right hand reflects the music of the virtuosic soloist. The Variations were finally published in 1881, more than three decades after Chopin's death.

### *Introduction and Variations on "Je vends des scapulaires"*

(From Ferdinand Hérold's opera, *Ludovic*)

Although he wrote no opera, Chopin was a great fan of the genre. He attended the premiere of *Ludovic*, a comic opera by Ferdinand Hérold in 1833. The tune, “Je vends des scapulaires” became popular outside of the opera, and formed the basis of these variations in 1833. A short introduction precedes the statement of Hérold’s melody. There are four subsequent variations and a coda. There are echoes of Polish dance in the second and fourth variations. In contrast to the “Schweitzerbub” Variations Chopin composed in his teens, the Variations on “Je vends des scapulaires” show a sharper focus on melody and less on flash, although there are plenty of quick passages designed to impress.

#### *Variations on the March from Bellini’s I puritani*

When Vincenzo Bellini passed away in 1835 he was two months shy of thirty-four. His operas had become something of a sensation in Paris, and his death was deeply mourned by his Parisian musical colleagues. Six of these colleagues, among them Liszt and Chopin, collected a set of variations on a march from Bellini’s last opera *I puritani*. The title of the variations was *Hexameron*, reflecting the six contributors. Chopin’s variation was the last in the set, and it follows a furiously fast passage by Liszt, and precedes Liszt’s coda and finale, marked *Molto Vivace Prestissimo*. Chopin’s variation is a *Largo*, and it provides a moment of thoughtful respite before Liszt’s animated close.

# Piano Sonatas

## Piano Sonatas

Chopin composed three piano sonatas over his career. The first dates from Chopin's teenage years and is rarely performed in public. It was dedicated to Józef Elsner, who was Chopin's teacher at the time, and it adheres in some ways to the traditional forms, but it has a couple of notable features. One of these is a third movement in 5/4 time, a very unusual choice.

The other two Piano Sonatas date from later years, one written in 1839 and one in 1844. Chopin completed the Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 35 in 1839. It is known by many as "The Funeral March," named for the famous third movement. There is no shortage of drama in this Sonata, especially in the first and last movements. Chopin uses his considerable gifts for innovative harmony here, and the work consistently impresses, especially in the virtuosic conclusion. Contemporary critics didn't know quite what to make of the sonata at first, but this is not surprising, considering that this work seems to mark the transition into Chopin's mature style.

Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor was composed when Chopin was thirty-four years old and his health was growing ever more fragile. Chopin was not able to give adequate time to composition while teaching and maintaining his status in Parisian society, so he composed mostly during summers at George Sand's estate in Nohant. The Piano Sonata in B minor, one of the works from Nohant, is a large-scale work in four movements. Although Chopin's composition was intimately tied to his playing, this was one work not premiered by Chopin, nor did he ever play it in a public performance. It has an emotional and noble opening movement, a light *Molto Vivace* second movement, a graceful *Largo* and an astounding virtuosic finale. All of the hallmarks of Chopin's style are here: tumultuous and talented playing, shifting moods, lyrical melodies, and an almost unbearable sense of longing. It is a true masterpiece and represents the culmination of a lifetime (albeit short) of piano playing.



# Piano Trio

## Piano Trio

In 1829-1830, Paganini and Hummel visited Warsaw and gave Chopin a taste of a larger world of music and experience. The young composer soon left for a quick trip to Berlin followed by a longer trip to Vienna. It was in Vienna in 1829 that Chopin made his debut on the international stage, to great acclaim. These were busy days, composing and performing, with uncertainty about the next move always lurking. Nevertheless, this was an important time for Chopin, as he was developing his own style, forming important connections, and making a name for himself.

Chopin's only Piano Trio dates from this period. He composed it over the years 1828 and 1829. In style, it is fairly conservative, following Classical models. Chopin seemed to have an affinity for the cello, but no special passion for the violin. This is in fact Chopin's only chamber work that features the instrument. (After the Trio was completed, Chopin considered re-orchestrating the piece to include viola rather than violin, but never made the change.) The first movement, marked *Allegro con fuoco*, is determined and dramatic. All three participants get to participate in the fast passagework in turn, although the piano is clearly the focal point at times. Chopin favored contrasts, of course, and the subsequent scherzo provides a gentle and pleasant respite. The following slow movement has lyrical melodies and affords the violin and cello a chance to share their expressive gifts. In the second half of the movement, the trio seems to hesitate, uncertain how to finish, but the long melodies return and bring the movement to an end. The final movement begins with a passage for the piano alone, but soon the violin and cello appear, imitating the opening theme and passing it around. The ending returns us to the dramatic mood of the beginning. After its publication, the Piano Trio received a favorable review from Robert Schumann, but it was soon overshadowed by Chopin's exquisite solo piano work.

# Solo Songs

## Solo Songs

We do not think of Chopin as a composer of vocal music; he didn't write a single opera in the course of his career. But he did try his hand at songs for voice and piano. They're certainly not as well known as his pieces for solo piano, and they are not often performed, but they are endlessly charming and show off a talent for vocal writing that we can otherwise discern in his melodic, lyrical phrases for piano.

He composed songs likely beginning in the late 1820s, when he was a teenager, although his style—throughout his exploration of the genre—is more akin to that of Franz Schubert, who wrote his *Lieder* a generation earlier. Chopin chose to set Polish texts, and rather than use the work of the literary elite, Chopin instead set the poetry of people he knew personally. His friend Stefan Witwicki, for example, provided the text for ten of Chopin's songs. Witwicki was also the dedicatee of a set of Chopin's *Mazurkas*.

There are nineteen songs that have survived, written at various times during Chopin's thirty-nine years. Only two were published while Chopin was alive. In 1857, the composer's friend and musical executor Julian Fontana published Op. 74, a set of sixteen songs. (The order of the set does not reflect the order in which the pieces were written.) Fontana published a seventeenth song separately, but it is now usually listed as part of Op. 74. The final surviving two songs were published in 1910.

A few of Chopin's songs are through composed, but many of them display a strophic structure and hallmarks of some Polish folk song or dance influence. This was yet another way for Chopin to show his nationalistic feelings toward his homeland and nostalgia for the life and culture he left behind. Unlike his contemporary Schumann, who also wrote songs for voice and piano, Chopin's piano parts for his songs are more accompanimental, and less integrated into the dramatic narrative. We might expect that the piano parts of Chopin's songs would be complex and challenging, but the composer was sensitive to the voice, allowing it to be the focus. The vocal parts in some songs show effervescent joy while others demonstrate deep emotion and pathos.

Between the years of 1847 and 1860, Franz Liszt chose half a dozen of the songs from Op. 74 and arranged them for piano solo, calling them *Six Chants polonaise*.

# Piano 4-hand/two pianos

## Piano 4-hand/two pianos

### *Rondo for Two Pianos Op. 73*

This early piece was originally intended as a piano solo. Chopin arranged it for two pianos in 1828, but did not seek to publish the work in either its original version or the two-piano version. It was published in Berlin in 1855 and it is his only surviving piece composed for a two-piano duet. It begins with an introduction, and continues with passages and themes that show contrast between light and dark, playful and mysterious, and forceful and lyrical. An impressive, virtuosic coda brings the work to a brilliant end.

### *Introduction, Theme, and Variations for 4 hands on a theme by Thomas Moore*

This very early work of Chopin was likely written when the composer was about sixteen years old. Chopin was quite smitten with this charming theme, which actually appears to be an Italian song. It is attributed to Irish poet Thomas Moore because he included the song in a collection published at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In Chopin's piece there is an introduction, five variations, and a finale. The writing covers the gamut from simple presentation to more virtuosic playing intended to show off the players' dexterity, but only the barest hints of the mature Chopin are in evidence here.

### *Grand Duo Concertante on Themes from Meyerbeer's Robert le diable*

Parisian society was quite taken with Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le diable* when it premiered in that city at the end of 1831. Chopin too, who had barely been in Paris for two months at the time, was impressed by the work. In 1832, Chopin and cellist Auguste Franchomme collaborated on a virtuosic piece featuring themes from Meyerbeer's opera. Although it begins with a brillante piano solo, and explores three themes from the opera, it doesn't fit well with Chopin's style, and indeed, the composer omitted it from his own list of compositions. Still, the collaboration helped forge a strong friendship between Chopin and Franchomme, who would become the dedicatee of Chopin's Cello Sonata in 1846. In the 1830s, Chopin would arrange the *Grand Duo Concertante* for four-hand piano.

# Miscellaneous Piano and Orchestra

## Miscellaneous Piano and Orchestra

Chopin spent his late teens writing pieces that would help build his reputation as a promising young composer and pianist. To this end, he composed a handful of orchestral works with piano as the featured soloist. His two Piano Concertos date from this period, as do a few single-movement works. Chopin's career would prove that he wasn't very much interested in the orchestra, although his works in this genre are actually quite enjoyable and inventive. He would complete the orchestral part of the Grand Polonaise Brillante in 1831. It was his final piece for orchestra and piano, and he completed it when he was just twenty-one.

### *Variations on "La ci darem la mano"*

Chopin was just a young man of seventeen when he endeavored to set a melody by Mozart for piano and orchestra. He was a great fan of Mozart, and one of his first large-scale pieces was a set of variations on "La ci darem la mano," a duet from Mozart's Don Giovanni.

Chopin premiered the piece in 1829, when he was visiting Vienna. The piece begins with a lengthy introduction, after which the piano presents "La ci darem la mano" in a very straightforward fashion. The first variation, marked *Brillante*, is fast and lively, as its name suggests, and the second is even faster than the first. An orchestral tutti intervenes in between the end of one variation and the beginning of another, with individual voices of the orchestral instruments punctuating these breaks. Some variations require the orchestra to provide sustained chords to support the harmony, while in others the instruments play a more active role. The fifth variation, in a minor key, provides some contrast and drama to a brilliant piece. According to Chopin, the enthusiastic audience applauded every variation of the melody. The coda, marked *Alla Polacca*, returns us to the glittering charm of the early variations. The piece ends in such spectacular fashion and displays such virtuosity throughout, it's no wonder Robert Schumann wrote of Chopin in his review of the piece, "Hats off, gentlemen! A genius!"

### *Rondo à la krakowiak*

Chopin penned the *Rondo à la krakowiak* when he was eighteen. It was composed under the careful supervision of his teacher Jozef Eisner. The composer premiered the piece at his first concert in Vienna in 1829, and it very much impressed and intrigued the audience. The orchestra plays a supportive and accompanimental role, for the most part, but Chopin shows skill in writing for the ensemble, and he is very sensitive to the strengths of each instrument.

He constructed this piece as a Rondo, which suggests that there is a melody or theme that returns over and over again. In this case, that melody is a *krakowiak*, a lively Polish dance. It was a popular folk dance, but it had also transitioned into fashionable high society. Chopin brings out the spirited rhythm of the style, which relies heavily on syncopated rhythms, and allows the soloist to shine in a skilled display of pianistic dexterity.

### *Fantasia on Polish Airs*

Chopin composed the *Fantasia on Polish Airs* in 1828 when he was eighteen, although its premiere didn't come until two years later. Chopin presented this piece, which features three national song styles of Poland, at his first large-scale concert at the National Theater in Warsaw in March of 1830.

The *Fantasia* begins with a slow introduction, marked *Largo ma non troppo*, that is almost nocturne-like in character. Chopin then presents three tunes, the first of which is a romantic melody, the second is a *dumka*—a Polish dance, and the third is a *kujawiak*. Chopin provides variations for each of the melodies, and the melodies themselves display contrast, with a lively major theme to begin the main section of the piece, a more brooding minor mode song in the middle, and a quick final section with brilliant passagework to bring things to an energetic close.

### *Grand Polonaise brillante*

Although the *Grand Polonaise* in E-flat is sometimes performed by itself, Chopin composed a solo piano piece to act as an introduction. The introduction, marked *Andante spianato*, was written a few years after the *Polonaise*, and Chopin planned to show great contrast between these sections. The opening part is docile and calm, almost suggesting some of the more gentle and evocative pieces in Chopin's solo piano repertoire. The sinuous right hand melody and the flowing accompaniment lull the listener into a peaceful state of mind. Horn calls then introduce both the *Polonaise* and a change of mood.

The orchestral opening of the *Polonaise* is noble, yet delicate. The piano enters, and the orchestra provides colorful accents and a sense of great warmth. The piano part is surely challenging, with quick scalar passages and thick harmonies. One can imagine how impressive and self-assured this piece must have sounded to audiences. The designation *brillante* is perfectly apt here, as the playing of the soloist is scintillating. He might not have known it at the time, but Chopin said goodbye to the orchestra with this *Polonaise*, and it is a fitting farewell, indeed.

# Piano Concertos

## Piano Concertos

*Piano Concerto No. 1 in E minor*

*Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor*

When Frédéric Chopin was about nineteen years old, he finished his education at the Warsaw Conservatory and began looking for funding to live and work abroad. On short trips to Berlin and Vienna, Chopin was able to play some of his music for new audiences, and he found that the pieces with Polish forms or characteristics were especially popular. He returned to Warsaw briefly before beginning a tour, and it was at this point that Chopin undertook the composition of his first piano concerto. This piece came to be known as the Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, and it was completed in 1830. The following year, Chopin completed another piano concerto, this one ultimately called the Piano Concerto No. 1 in E minor. (The reversed numbering reflects the order of publication.) In response to the positive reaction European audiences had to the Polish character he'd already displayed in his music, the third movements of both concertos are based on Polish dance forms.

In March of 1730, Chopin performed a concert at the Polish National Theater in Warsaw. The F minor Concerto was extremely well received, and the entire concert was repeated—with small changes—less than a week later. The Polish public was immediately smitten with Chopin's charming use of national dance rhythms and folksongs. In October of that same year, Chopin presented one final concert in Warsaw, this one featuring the E minor Concerto. After the success of this concert—which was not quite as overwhelming as the one in March—Chopin finally left for Vienna, where he spent eight months. He was not able to repeat the success he'd had there previously, and he moved on to Paris with the intention of going to London, but he ended up making Paris his home thereafter.

Unlike other Romantic composers like Liszt or even Beethoven, Chopin had no great desire to re-invent the concerto form. Chopin's Piano Concertos show a conservative style in the orchestral writing, but where they are truly unique and special is in the music for the soloist. The melodic material that is first presented by the orchestra is lovely, but in the hands of the soloist, it is magic. Chopin truly succeeded—and certainly this was his foremost intention—in creating stunning showpieces for himself. The orchestra in Chopin's concertos supports and encourages. It does not overpower. It stays in the background most of the time, but it shapes the harmonies that highlight Chopin's delightful melodies.

There are three movements in Piano Concerto No. 1 in E minor. The first movement, marked *Allegro maestoso*, is as majestic as its marking suggests.

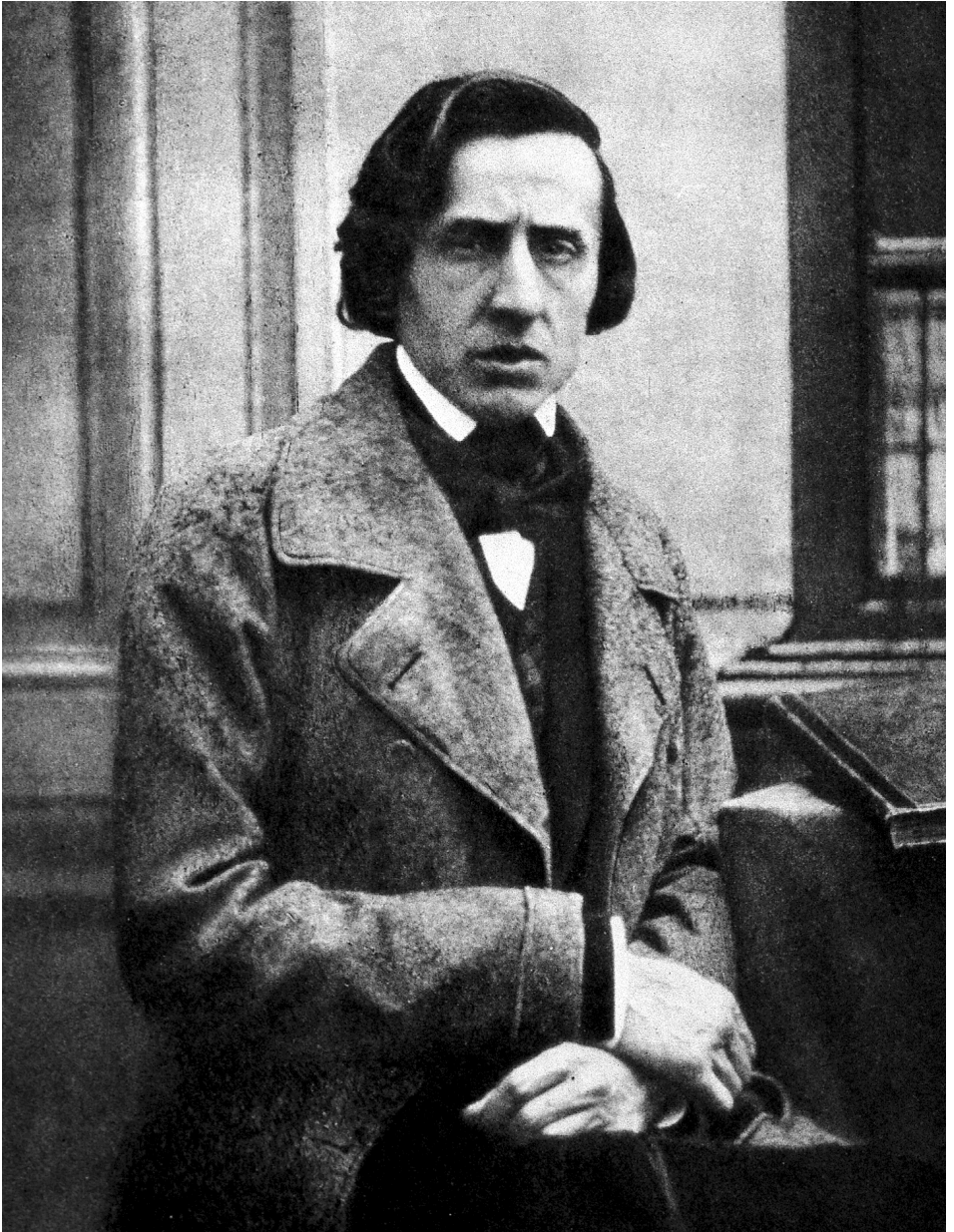
The orchestral exposition seems to hold itself back a little, but once the piano enters, the movement opens up and shows its noble bearing. The second movement, marked *Romanze Larghetto*, is a nocturne that virtually sings with tunefulness. A nocturne is simply a musical piece that evokes the night. Chopin is probably the best-known composer of solo piano nocturnes, a genre that is thoroughly Romantic. (He wrote twenty-one of them.) There is no conflict here, no overwrought drama. Chopin's gift for melody absolutely shines. At the end of the movement, lovely bassoon lines intertwine with the piano, giving us a chance to distinctly hear the woodwinds and piano together. The music of Poland appears in the finale, a *Vivace - rondo* that features a polka. Chopin paid homage to his homeland in numerous pieces, both big and small, and here he brings this lively dance to an international audience.

The opening movement of the F minor concerto, marked *Maestoso*, is sufficiently dramatic, with the piano soloist taking on most of the thematic development. In this movement, Chopin eschews the traditional cadenza, possibly because the entire movement has had the soloist as its focal point. The second movement seems to draw upon the *bel canto* style popular in the Italian operas of the time. The piano part may seem improvisational, but it was meticulously planned. The delicacy and intimacy of the movement come more sharply into focus when we realize that while writing this piece, Chopin claimed to have been thinking of a young woman he'd known (and loved) at the Warsaw Conservatory. The final movement, an *Allegro vivace*, was inspired by the mazurka, another Polish dance. The piano again gets the spotlight, with the orchestra providing accents and punctuation. The soloist never rests, and indeed the virtuosity, ornamentation and adventurous lines continue to the very end of this scintillating rondo.

Although Chopin included Polish folk music in his works to exploit the "exotic" tastes of the Viennese and Parisians, there are also political implications of Chopin's use of folk music. Chopin, because he had emigrated, was able to give voice to a culture oppressed by the Czar. Poland had been under the threat of Russian occupation since the end of the Napoleonic wars and the Congress of Vienna. After the war, according to the provisions of the Congress of Vienna, Poland was supposed to retain internal autonomy, but Russian authorities gradually moved into a position of direct power under orders from the Czar. Certainly Chopin wrote in this manner because he missed his homeland, but there is a definite feeling that Chopin felt the need to show the larger musical world the beauty of Polish folk music, a tradition that was surely being crushed under political machinery. Robert Schumann grasped the implications of Chopin's music, saying that Chopin was a dangerous enemy of Czar Nicholas. Schumann stated, "Those works [mazurkas] are like cannons hidden beneath flowers."

As the remainder of Chopin's output would prove, the two piano concertos are something of an anomaly in a key respect: Chopin rarely wrote orchestral music. And he rarely performed in public, finding it taxing on his poor health. He expended his energies on teaching and composing, and the performances he did undertake were usually for intimate gatherings of friends.

# Media



One of only two known photographs of Frédéric Chopin, taken by Louis-Auguste Bisson in 1849. Source: Wikipedia



**TROIS**  
**NOCTURNES**  
pour le  
**Piano-forte**  
composés et dédiés à Madame  
**CAMILLE PLEYEL**  
par  
**FRED. CHOPIN.**

*Oeuvre 9.*

*Pr. 14 Gr.*

Propriété des Editeurs.  
Enregistré aux Archives de l'Union.

*Leipzig, chez Fr. Kistner.*  
*Paris, chez M. Schlesinger.*

995.



Quatre  
**MAZURKAS**  
pour le  
**Piano-Forte**  
composées et dédiées  
*à Madame Lina Freppa*  
par

**FRED. CHOPIN.**

Propriété des Editeurs.

*Oeuv. 17.*

À LEIPSIC,

*Pr. 20 Ngr.*

*Chez Breitkopf & Härtel.*

à Paris,

*Chez J. Pleyel & Co.*

*Enregistré dans les Archives de l'Union.*



MAZURKAS IN B FLAT MAJOR, E MINOR, A FLAT MAJOR, A MINOR Opus 17  
Leipzig : Breitkopf & Härtel, [not before 1841]

**BALLADE.**

**LENTO.**

*pesante.*

*f*

*dim*

**MODERATO.**

*p*

*3*

*3*

*6/4*

*6/4*

*Ped.*

5706.

Joan

*Maestoso*



Autographed partiture by the Polish composer Frédéric Chopin of his Polonaise Op. 53 in A flat major for piano, 1842. Source: Heineman Music Collection, Pierpont Morgan Library



Polonaise, pour le piano, dédiée à Monsieur Auguste Leo, par F. Chopin.  
L'éditeur Breitkopf et Härtel. Paris Schlesinger. Londres Moul et Ingles. Op. 53.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a Polonaise by Frédéric Chopin, Op. 53. The score is written on five systems of staves. The notation is complex, featuring many beamed sixteenth and thirty-second notes, creating a dense texture. There are several dynamic markings, including 'p' (piano) and 'f' (forte), and some handwritten annotations. The paper is aged and shows some wear, with a small tear visible on the right side. The score is dedicated to Monsieur Auguste Leo and was published by Breitkopf et Härtel in Paris and Schlesinger in London.



Autograph of the first page of his Prelude no. 15, the "Raindrop." Note how he scratches out several measures of the score at the point where the Prelude changes from Db Major to C# Minor. Source: Wikipedia





Thank you to all of the musicians that took part in this project, and to our incredible backers for your support. Without all of you this would not have been possible.

*Rhapsia*